

Australia: Smeaton Grange Coles workers reject union sell-out agreement

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Locked-out Coles workers at the company's Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney reportedly voted down a sell-out enterprise agreement that had been pushed by management and the United Workers Union (UWU) in an online ballot on Tuesday.

In a text message to workers yesterday evening, which has been seen by the WSWS, Coles Distribution Centre Manager Joseph Fernandopulle reported that 167 workers had cast a "no" vote, as against 163 "yes" ballots. Fernandopulle stated that the participation rate was 93 percent.

The UWU is seeking to prevent other workers from even knowing about the official ballot, which was required for the agreement to be ratified under industrial relations legislation. As of this time, the union has not made any post on its official Facebook page or its website announcing the result. Instead, the union acknowledged that the offer had been voted down, in a Facebook comment buried beneath a posting from January 22.

By rejecting the deal, the Smeaton Grange workers have taken a significant stand, not only in defence of their own jobs and conditions, but also those of thousands of other warehouse staff who face union-enforced sackings and closures, and the working class as a whole. The "no" vote is a direct rebuke to the UWU, which has placed maximum pressure on the workers to accept a rotten agreement that would provide for the closure of the Smeaton Grange warehouse and the destruction of most, if not all, of the 350 jobs there.

The rejection of the UWU deal poses the urgent need for the widest discussion among Smeaton Grange workers, Coles and Woolworth staff, and workers more broadly, on what is to be done next. The defeat of the agreement is an important first step, but it is only the beginning of a fight to prevent the closure and defend all jobs.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which campaigned

among workers for a "no" vote, is holding an online meeting this Saturday, 5pm (AEDT) to develop such a discussion. All workers and young people are invited to attend the event, entitled "After Smeaton Grange workers reject union sell-out: The way forward for Coles and Woolworths workers" (Click here to register and participate).

Above all, what is required is a complete break with the UWU, which has proven itself to be a police force of management. New organisations of struggle, independent of the unions, are required. Workers should establish genuine rank-and-file committees at Smeaton Grange, and at all Coles and Woolworths warehouses, to organise a unified industrial and political struggle against the job-cutting program of the company managements and the union.

The necessity of this step is demonstrated by the entire history of the Smeaton Grange dispute and the ongoing attempts of the union to impose a betrayal, which will only be stepped-up following the "no" vote.

Over the course of more than two months, the UWU has isolated the workers, effectively enforcing a company lock-out, and blocking any joint struggle against Coles' attacks. The union has ensured that production has continued at every other Coles and Woolworths facility, including those that are also slated for closure, to prevent the lockout having any impact on the profits of the giant corporations that dominate the sector.

At the same time, it has refused to provide strike pay, in a bid to starve workers out and force them to accept a sell-out agreement. A number of workers who have spoken to the WSWS indicated that they would vote "yes," only because they had exhausted their savings and superannuation funds and were desperate for work.

Over the past month, the union has come out openly as the enforcer of all of Coles' demands. Throughout the dispute, the UWU has presented the closure and job

destruction as “inevitable.” It claimed only to be seeking a “just transition” and improved redundancy payments. Now, the union has dispensed with even this bogus posturing.

On January 15, Coles called a ballot on an enterprise agreement, virtually identical to those that had been rejected by workers on four previous occasions. The UWU declared that it was taking a “neutral” position, but sent a video to workers that had the character of a company promotion of the “offer.” When workers voted “no,” the union immediately sought to overturn their decision.

The UWU organised an “indicative” union ballot on January 22. It claimed that workers had narrowly endorsed the agreement, which they had voted down a week before. An unusually high number of votes, numbering more than 100, had been discounted as “duplicates,” and there was no independent scrutiny of the ballot. Since then, the union has presented the agreement as a done deal, invoking its dubious in-house ballot, to try and pressure workers into voting “yes” in the formal ballot that was held Tuesday.

Yesterday’s “no” vote was a blow to these plans, but the union will intensify its efforts to force through a sell-out. The company lockout is scheduled to end on February 11. Management and the UWU will again ramp-up the pressure on workers to accept an offer, so that they can resume paid-work. Coles has previously stated that it will not allow any of the workers to return, until they have ratified an agreement. Even if workers are allowed back without a deal having been accepted, the plans to wind-down Smeaton Grange over the coming months, in preparation for a full closure, remain.

The UWU is desperately trying to cover-up its own sordid role, and to prevent workers’ opposition erupting out of its control. It has called two national meetings of delegates on Thursday to “discuss” proposals for a “national strike fund.” This is a contemptible farce. The union, which claims 150,000 members, and receives millions of dollars in dues money every month, has refused to provide strike pay for more than two months.

Moreover, whatever is decided on Thursday, the UWU is not going to take any action to prevent the spate of closures in the industry. Instead, it is seeking to use Smeaton Grange as a model for “orderly shutdowns” that will be imposed elsewhere. At least eight Coles and Woolworths warehouses are slated to be closed over the next four years, as both companies develop automated facilities. More than 2,200 jobs are on the line at Coles,

and 1,300 at Woolworths.

This mass jobs cull can only be defeated by a unified movement of workers throughout both companies, and more broadly, directly opposed to the UWU. A network of independent rank-and-file committees at all Coles and Woolworths facilities is needed. These would be able to organise national industrial action that would rapidly halt the operations of the two companies which control a substantial segment of Australia’s food distribution. Such action would immediately create a political crisis, and would win support from broad sections of the working class who face a similar assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

This is a political fight. It is directed against not only Coles, but the government, Labor, the unions and the entire framework of Fair Work Australia industrial legislation, which they all use to intimidate workers with the threat of massive fines and criminal prosecution for any collective action. It is a struggle, moreover, against the attempts by the official political parties and the corporate elite to force workers to bear the burden of the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, including through sweeping pro-business restructuring.

Above all, workers require a new political perspective. The unions and the companies say that job losses are inevitable, because of automation. But this is based entirely on the logic of capitalism, which subordinates every aspect of society, including developments in productivity, to the profit interests of the major corporations.

The alternative is the fight for a workers’ government and socialism. If the major banks and the corporations were placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, advances in automation could be used to reduce working hours, on full pay, and to improve health, safety and other conditions. This will only be realised through the development of a mass political movement of the working class, directed against capitalism.

The SEP appeals to all Smeaton Grange, Coles, Woolworths and other workers to attend the meeting this Saturday to discuss this perspective, and the way forward. Register here.



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